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ALAN WELSH

FRAME-UP:

The Martin Luther King/
James Earl Ray Case

by Harold Weisberg

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Reviewed by Fred J. Cook

On March 10, 1969, in a Memphis courtroom, the curtain rose on one of the most brazen travesties of justice ever to disgrace America. James Earl Ray, the accused killer of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was to go on trial. But there was no trial. There was instead a deal between judge, prosecutor, and defense attorney. Ray would plead guilty in exchange for a life sentence, and the court would return the verdict so much desired by the American Establishment: Ray had acted alone.

The drama ran as smoothly as a well-plotted Hollywood film—up to a point. Then James Earl Ray spoke. He did not agree, he said, with Attorney General Ramsey Clark and FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, who had been insisting there was no conspiracy. Here was the man who had to know, and, at some risk to himself, he was telling the court that the script was phony. Defense Attorney Percy Foreman, who had had to browbeat his unwilling client into copping a plea instead of standing trial, leaped into the breach. It was not necessary, he said, for Ray to accept everything; all that mattered

was that he was pleading guilty to the crime. Was he? the judge asked. Yes, Ray said, and the juggernaut of official machinery rolled over his feeble but courageous protest.

Harold Weisberg, a onetime government investigator who has devoted himself to a pursuit of the ignored or suppressed facts about political assassinations, has now turned to the case of James Earl Ray in the book he calls *Frame-Up*. He does not doubt that Ray was implicated in the King assassination, but his thesis is that Ray filled the same role Lee Harvey Oswald did in the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in Dallas. In Weisberg's view Ray, like Oswald, was not the killer; he was the decoy, the patsy, the man meant to be caught.

Weisberg shows that in the King case, just as in Dallas, a baffling use was made of doubles. Just as there is evidence that two men used the name of Lee Harvey Oswald, so is there evidence that someone besides James Earl Ray knew and used some of his various aliases. Here are a few of the points Weisberg raises:

Ray's arrest at Heathrow (London) Airport, June 8, 1968. According to Scotland Yard, Ray, traveling under the name of Ramon George Sneyd, came into the airport about 6:15 A.M. on a flight from Lisbon. While waiting for his plane to refuel and fly on to Brussels, he wandered unnecessarily into the immigration section for incoming passengers and was spotted and detained. But on that date a man using the name of Ramon George

Sneyd was living—and had been for several days—at the Pax Hotel in London. He left about 9:15 the same morning to catch a plane for Brussels. The FBI's reconstruction of the case was based upon the proposition that Sneyd No. 2 was really Ray. The landlady of the Pax was subpoenaed for possible appearance in the Memphis farce, which the press dubbed "the minitrial." She said afterwards that she had been warned by an FBI agent, accompanied by four Scotland Yard operatives, that she was only to answer the questions she was asked—she was not to volunteer anything. When she remarked that she had found a hypodermic syringe in "Sneyd's" room after he left, she was "virtually told" she must be lying because Ray was not a narcotics addict. Was this all just some kind of official foul-up in announcing the details of Ray's arrest? No; as Weisberg shows by correspondence he reproduces, Scotland Yard was insisting in November 1968—five and a half months later—that the man it had arrested arrived on a Lisbon flight. Who, then, was the man at the Pax who had been using Ray's alias?

The two white Mustangs. The official version states that after Ray shot Dr. King from the bathroom window of a Memphis flophouse, he made his escape in a 1966 white Mustang he had purchased secondhand in Birmingham, Alabama. He drove some 400 miles through the night and abandoned the car in an Atlanta parking lot, where it was not discovered for days. But there is abundant evidence that two similar white Mustangs were parked in the street near the flophouse at the time of the slaying. According to eyewitnesses, both had red and white license plates—one set were Alabama tags, the other Arkansas. Furthermore, the Mustang which Ray had purchased in Birmingham had an automatic shift, while the one abandoned in Atlanta, with Ray's license plates on it, had a stick shift. The ashtray of the abandoned Mustang was overflowing with cigarette butts—and Ray does not smoke. No mention of model or serial numbers, which would have identified the Mustang positively, was made at the Memphis minitrial, and, though the car must have been splattered with fingerprints, there was no indication that the FBI had found a single print of Ray's in this, his supposed getaway car—evidence that almost certainly would have been flaunted, if it existed, to rivet the case beyond doubt.

The duplicate driver's license. In early March 1968 Ray was in Los Angeles attending bartender's school and getting his pointed nose clipped by a plastic surgeon. Records establish his

presence there beyond doubt. But, at this very time, the Alabama Highway Patrol received a telephone call from a man calling himself Eric Starvo Galt (the alias Ray had used in Birmingham). The caller said he had lost his driver's license and needed a duplicate, and gave the address of the Birmingham rooming house at which Ray had stayed. The duplicate license was mailed; the small fee required for this service was promptly paid—and Ray was not in Birmingham, but in California, nearly a continent away. The evidence seems unchallengeable that someone other than Ray—the rooming-



house proprietor could not say who—had picked up the duplicate license and mailed the fee.

The telltale bundle. According to the official version, Ray, after shooting King, walked out of the flophouse, deposited a bundle almost in the doorway of an adjacent café, strolled down the street, and drove off in his Mustang. The bundle contained the rifle Ray had purchased and which supposedly did the killing, put carefully back into its cardboard carrying case and wrapped in a green bedspread, along with a pair of binoculars which Ray had bought that very afternoon and which were decorated with his fingerprints. There was also a shaving set he had purchased the day before—and, most helpful of all, a transistor radio he had acquired while in Missouri State Prison, with his prison number stenciled on it. Weisberg holds that it defies belief that the real killer would have taken the time to insert the rifle in its case and wrap up all these articles, then just drop them on the street instead of taking them with him in the Mustang. Such an action, he argues logically, can be reconciled only with the role of a man serving as decoy in an elaborate plot.

Evidence that Ray fired the shot. There is none. The medical examiner's testimony at the minitrial failed to establish the first essential—the trajectory of the shot that killed Dr. King. *Paris-Match* tried the experiment of re-enacting the crime and found that the killer would have had to be a contortionist to have fired from the bathtub, as was alleged. Ballistics testimony was worthless. Dr. King had been killed by a soft-nosed dumdum bullet; when it struck it exploded and fragmented. The prosecution claimed the largest fragment was "consistent"

with a shot fired from Ray's rifle. That is the very word used by a corrupt prosecution in the Sacco-Vanzetti trial, when a police expert who was convinced fatal shots had *not* been fired from a given revolver was asked whether it was "consistent" that they had. He could answer "Yes," since the shots had obviously been fired from a revolver. So here "consistent" means only that the bullet fragment came from a rifle. The term that so deceived press and public does not meet the first requirement of proof—that the ballistics expert be able to testify the shot came from Ray's rifle and no other.

There is more, much more, in Weisberg's book. There is the question of how Ray, alone and unaided, a stranger in Canada, managed to come up with aliases that were the real names of three living men who looked much like him, in one case even to a similar scar on the face. There is the mystery of his free-spending, cross-continental Canadian-Mexican spree, and of how a penny-ante crook like Ray came by so much money. There is the business of the phony police radio broadcast on the night of the assassination, graphically describing a gun battle with a fleeing car, which led police north out of Memphis and away from the assassin's escape route. The reek of conspiracy is on everything.

Weisberg is an indefatigable researcher. Unfortunately, he is not a skilled writer. His book suffers from lack of organization and conciseness. He mentions an issue in passing, then pages or even chapters later he goes back and worries it. He repeatedly lashes out at virtually all concerned in the minitrial as liars and scoundrels, devoting long passages to denunciation instead of the cool presentation of evidence. Though his indignation is in most instances thoroughly justified, it gets in the way of the story.

But when all this has been said, Weisberg remains invaluable. He has pursued the facts, and they are there, buried in the mass of his book. And they are facts that lay claim to the conscience of America. For it should be clear by now that, if the assassinations of some of the nation's most outstanding leaders are to be dismissed with the "one man-no conspiracy" refrain, there will be no deterrent to conspiracies in the future whenever hate may point the way and pull the trigger. And, in that event, this greatest of democracies will have been reduced to the status of a Latin American banana republic. That is the issue.

Fred J. Cook is the author of "The Troubled Land," "The Secret Rulers," and "The FBI Nobody Knows."